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ABSTRACT

Improving the quality of undergraduate speech communication education depends to a large extent on effectively measuring student achievement in college level communication skills. While formal tests are not as well developed for speaking skills as for other areas of the curriculum, they are available. The two used most frequently are the Communication Competency Assessment Instrument (CCAI) and the Speaking Assessment section of ACT's College Outcome Measures Program. Both of these assessment tools were founded on the premise that impressions of communication competence are based on actual behaviors. The ACT Speaking Skills Assessment consists of three 3-minute speaking assignments, based upon print stimuli material that students usually read in advance to allow preparation time. The speaking assignments are practical in nature and require about 15 minutes to administer. ACT provides the testing institution with rating scales and prescored speaking samples for later training. The CCAI is administered in three sections. The first part involves numerous judgments about students' speaking abilities. Next, the students view a videotaped class lecture, and then they respond to statements about both the videotape and experiences they have had. The CCAI assesses those speech skills that are directly observable in the impressions formed of students by others. Speech performance ratings such as these seem to offer the most effective evaluation of the skills learned in a speech communication class. (HOD)

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Measuring Speech Communication Skills

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The public wants results. Public polls in Tennessee, Arkansas, South Carolina, Oklahoma, and Colorado have all indicated that the public is willing to pay more for education, provided there is indication of substantial improvement in quality.¹ It is clear that state policy makers and parents are not going to provide more money for education if we do not provide more education for the money. Education is engaged in stiff fiscal competition with transportation, the environment, and the rebuilding of urban infrastructures. Unless improvements in the quality of education can be documented, and demonstrated, policy makers and the public

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will lose interest in education.

A high quality program in communication needs to know what is happening to its students and needs to give its faculty members clear-cut opportunities to develop teaching skills under minimally threatening conditions. A high quality program also needs a system of feedback on student development, student gains, that enables it to make appropriate adjustments in programs or policies when the need for change or improvement is indicated. No longer is quality equated just with historical prestige, faculty degrees, or physical facilities, but rather with a continuing process of critical self-examination that focuses on the program's contributions to the student's intellectual and personal development.²

Improving the quality of our undergraduate communication education is difficult. However, accountable high quality communication programs are possible. To accomplish the accountable program, we must, as faculty, agree upon what it is that we are doing. We must together set new standards not only at the entry, but also during and at the exit from our courses of study. There is no shortcut to achieving quality. The rigor with which we undertake teaching and learning determines the quality of the program. When able and committed faculty set and maintain high standards and common goals, they challenge students to develop the abilities that have always marked an educated person: facility in spoken and written communication.³ Faculty, through defining and teaching the curriculum, hold the most important keys to the improvement of our programs. If we will focus on student achievement as a means of defining and developing the curriculum,

we can meet the public demand for accountability.

The major question arises at this point: can we effectively measure speech communication skills acquired in the college classroom? Many will immediately say no. After all, the aims of the communication classroom extend far beyond things that can be tested--however the tests are referenced. Any externally developed test is going to have an imperfect fit with the educational goals of a particular teacher or program; however, far too often we use such statements as an excuse to do nothing. On the other hand, it does not take a dyed-in-the-wool social Darwinist to recognize that standardized testing is increasing because it serves some important social and educational needs.⁴ Standardized testing can mean the examination of and experimentation with our educational assumptions, ideas, and practices. If we answer the question I posed with "No, we cannot measure communication skills," we are suggesting more about the state of our discipline than we are about the effectiveness of testing. We must not forget that the information teachers need and use comes mostly from tests that they develop themselves. Do we really want to tell the world that for all these many years we as teachers of speech communication have not been able to effectively measure what we were teaching in the classroom? Do we mean to say that we cannot measure student achievement in speech communication? Are we willing to admit that there is no way that students can demonstrate that they have learned anything in our classes or that their thinking and behavior have been changed by studying with us? I think not.

Let me borrow an example from Peter Ewell⁵ regarding the "how"

of assessment. We would certainly agree that no one would be better qualified to assess what young Alexander was learning than his tutor Aristotle. Surely, Aristotle's assessment would reflect an intimate knowledge of what he was trying to teach, and it would be based on direct, daily, personal observation of what his pupil was learning. Certainly Aristotle was a well-qualified judge, because he had frequent, even daily, opportunities to observe his pupil directly. Is this not true of most of us today? Surely no one is better qualified to say what a student knows about communication than the man or woman who teaches the communication course. The difficulty in using faculty for the assessment of student learning, however, lies in the fact that different faculty have different criteria and goals for judging students' performance. To the degree that teachers assign grades on some sort of curve, the grades have little if any meaning beyond the particular students enrolled in the course at any given time. However, if we as communication professors have some collective basic criteria for good performance, then our grades will have some relevance as assessments of student achievement. When there are accepted criteria for performance, it becomes possible to determine how many students achieve the desired level. For years we have sponsored various contests in communication performance and have gone on record assessing individual student achievement in those contests. How effective have we been? How firm is our base of collective criteria for judging speech communication performance?

Keller, Seifrit, and Baldwin were among the pioneers addressing the issue of standard tests in communication. They

reported, "there is widespread concern regarding the validity and reliability of proficiency examinations. It is hard to draw conclusions regarding this matter, since the purpose and construction of such exams varies with the educational philosophy of the department of speech throughout the country."⁶

These and later scholars seem to be immobilized by what they perceive as individual criteria for performance among faculty and departments. Is it true: is there no substance to the discipline of speech communication? Is there no body of knowledge, no accepted criterion for achievement? Are we all snake oil salesmen, each with his own secret formula?

Speech communication has a rich history that has been building a corpus of skills and information for thousands of years. We can and must begin to develop instruments and standardize them to assess the achievement of our students in the vast area of theory. Speech communication skills acquired in the college classroom are based on learned theory. This acquired theory can be effectively measured. But we are talking about performance and what we somehow believe is unique to our discipline.

Performance, the application of theory, is not unique to speech communication, for in other disciplines the ability to do, to perform effectively, is the final test. Music, science, art, all require that final performance, and that performance is assessed.

While formal tests for speaking skills are not as well developed as far as other areas of the curriculum, they are available. Dr. Rebecca Rubin chaired a subcommittee for SCA which

produced a report on the oral communication assessment procedures and instrument development in higher education.⁷ The two most used currently are the Communication Competency Assessment Instrument and the Speaking Assessment section of ACT's College Outcome Measures Program. Both of these assessment tools were founded on the premise that impressions of communication competence are based on actual behaviors.

In addition, a number of states have developed formal assessment procedures for elementary and secondary speech communication programs. Georgia, Louisiana, Maine, Minnesota, Michigan, Massachusetts, North Dakota, Vermont, and Utah, have developed both curriculum and assessment instruments in speaking and listening. The value of these efforts to us are as examples of how formal tests may be constructed.

The ACT Speaking Skills Assessment was developed as a subtest of the COMP Composite Examination. The assessment consists of three 3-minute speaking assignments. These speaking assignments are based upon print stimuli material which students read usually a day in advance to allow preparation time. The entire assessment requires about fifteen minutes to administer. The three speaking assignments are practical in nature rather than academic. The contents for the three samples are a social science topic, a science topic, and a fine arts topic. Students are instructed to make the three oral presentations in a language lab setting so that they may be taped in groups. The tapes are later played back for evaluation by faculty. One presentation is personal, a second is to a small group, and a third is to a large group. The taped

speaking samples are evaluated using rating scales which COMP/ACT has developed and verified with the assistance of college speech instructors. Colleges score the Speaking Skills Assessment locally. ACT provides the institution with rating scales and pre-scored speaking samples for later training. After training, about twelve minutes per student are required to evaluate the three speeches. ACT will also re-score a sample (usually around ten percent) of the speaking assessments to assure the institution that appropriate judgments are being made in comparing speaking skills at other institutions. The use of the Speaking Skills Assessment by colleges and universities can provide faculties with diagnostic information as well as comparisons with students at other participating institutions.⁸

The Communication Competency Assessment Instrument (CCAI) is designed to rate college students' communication skills. The instrument was created to provide a measure of students' abilities to speak, listen, and relate to others both within the college classroom setting and outside classroom contexts. Scores on individual items may be examined by the raters, but should not be interpreted as individual measures of competence for those skill areas; single-item interpretation is much less reliable than the total index.

The CCAI is administered in three sections. The first part of the test involves numerous judgments about a student's speaking ability. Next the student views a videotaped class lecture, and then the students are asked to respond in various ways to statements about both the videotape and experiences they have had.

All student responses to assessment items are either oral or nonverbal in nature; the student is not rated on writing or reading ability. The CCAI assesses only the student's abilities to communicate through speech.⁹

Most of the CCAI items that discriminate high- from low-skilled students relate to public speaking, giving directions, persuasiveness, clarity of ideas, and clear articulation. The CCAI is a valid and reliable method of assessing the behavioral/-performance aspect of communication competence. It assesses those skills that are directly observable in the impressions formed of students by others.¹⁰

Donald Rubin, University of Georgia, makes a number of observations regarding speech performance assessment.¹¹ He states that to be effective, speech performance testing should be direct, not questioning students about oral communication without engaging in it. Speech performance ratings, like the two assessment instruments discussed above, seem to offer the most effective evaluation of the skills learned in a speech communication class. These performance ratings--cumbersome, liable to measurement error, relatively costly--appear to be the optimal method for assessing speaking proficiency. They have no inherent impediments to validity, and they are clearly relevant to the skills being assessed.

It needs to be emphasized that fair and meaningful performance rating requires consistent judgment and minimal measurement error. There are well-constructed tests of knowledge, intellectual skills, attitudes, interests, values, and personal traits. If they fit

your objectives reasonably well, you should use them. They are reliable, and you can use the results to make comparisons with other students at other colleges.

Great Britain, where large-scale testing of oral skills has been conducted for some time, provides a valuable example of the impact of oral assessment on learning. British Certificate of Secondary Education examinations have included some type of speech sample since 1965.¹² While numerous curricular documents stress the importance of instruction in speaking, British educators recognize that the institution of formalized testing lent respectability to speech instruction and shaped the nature of speech communication curriculum.¹³

The goal of speech communication instruction in the college classroom is to develop students' ability to communicate orally. It is a goal that should result in student growth. To be accountable, we must be able to demonstrate positive changes in our students' ability to speak/perform. We must set learning objectives for our discipline that will allow our students to compete in a national and international marketplace. Our students, our programs, our effectiveness will be judged on the results of the education process, not on the process itself. As faculty, we must be prepared to certify that our students can and do perform at clear, agreed-upon levels.

Can we agree upon what we want to teach? Yes, we can, and we must. Can we agree upon a desirable level of student achievement? Certainly we can. And can we measure speech communication skills? The answer is unquestionably yes! And measure we must.

NOTES

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